

DBQ: Athenian Democracy

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Historical Context

It should strike anyone as strange to see democracy develop anywhere. There is always someone in charge; someone in power. Why on earth would they give up that power to let people rule themselves democratically? Democracy developed first in Athens and the Athenians knew it; they were proud of it.

Task

In a well-organized essay, discuss the nature of Athenian Democracy and explain why it developed. The best essays will include extensive relevant outside information. Students should not be shy about giving their own reflections or opinions in their conclusion.

Some Recommended Outside Information

- Cleisthenes' reforms
- Pericles and Athens under his rule
- Some details on the democratic process, rights and responsibilities of citizens, in Athens
- The hoplite phalanx
- The practice of ostracism

The Best Essay...

- Thoroughly develops all aspects of the task evenly and in depth
- Is more analytical than descriptive (analyzes, evaluates, and/or creates information)
- Incorporates relevant information from at least **“half plus one”** documents
- Incorporates substantial relevant outside information
- Richly supports the theme with many relevant facts, examples, and details
- Demonstrates a logical and clear plan of organization; includes an introduction and a conclusion that are beyond a restatement of the theme

NOTE: Documents 1-4 will be difficult to read for the typical high school student. I have included a translation of the documents into a more reader-friendly version in the appendix to this DBQ. I recommend, however, that the student have a go at reading the high-brow version first as an academic exercise.

Document 1

Now in all states there are three elements: one class is very rich, another very poor, and a third in a mean. It is admitted that moderation and the mean are best, and therefore it will clearly be best to possess the gifts of fortune in moderation; for in that condition of life men are most ready to follow rational principle. But he who greatly excels in beauty, strength, birth, or wealth, or on the other hand who is very poor, or very weak, or very much disgraced, finds it difficult to follow rational principle. [...] the middle class is least likely to shrink from rule, or to be over-ambitious for it; both of which are injuries to the state. Again, those who have too much of the goods of fortune, strength, wealth, friends, and the like, are neither willing nor able to submit to authority. [...] a city ought to be composed, as far as possible, of equals and similars; and these are generally the middle classes. [...] And this is the class of citizens which is most secure in a state, for they do not, like the poor, covet their neighbors' goods; nor do others covet theirs, as the poor covet the goods of the rich; and as they neither plot against others, nor are themselves plotted against, they pass through life safely. Wisely then did Phocylides pray- 'Many things are best in the mean; I desire to be of a middle condition in my city.'

Aristotle: The Polis, from *Politics*

1. According to Aristotle, who is best suited to rule?
2. Why are those who “greatly excel in beauty, strength, birth, or wealth” unfit to rule?
3. Why are those who are “very poor, or very weak, or very much disgraced” unfit to rule?

Document 2

Our constitution does not copy the laws of neighboring states; we are rather a pattern to others than imitators ourselves. Its administration favors the many instead of the few; this is why it is called a democracy. If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to all in their private differences; if to social standing, advancement in public life falls to reputation for capacity, class considerations not being allowed to interfere with merit; nor again does poverty bar the way, if a man is able to serve the state, he is not hindered by the obscurity of his condition. The freedom which we enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life. [...]

Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*

1. What does Pericles say about equality?
2. What does Pericles say about freedom?

Document 3

Herodotus relates a debate on three kinds of government: monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy.

[Otanés says:] [Kings] are jealous of the most virtuous among their subjects, and wish their death; while they take delight in the meanest and basest, being ever ready to listen to the tales of slanderers. A king, besides, is beyond all other men inconsistent with himself. Pay him court in moderation, and he is angry because you do not show him more profound respect--- show him profound respect, and he is offended again, because (as he says) you fawn on him. But the worst of all is, that he sets aside the laws of the land, puts men to death without trial, and subjects women to violence. The rule of the many [...] is free from all those outrages which a king is wont to commit. There, places are given by lot, the magistrate is answerable for what he does, and measures rest with the commonalty. [...]

[Megabyzus says:] Megabyzus spoke next, and advised the setting up of an oligarchy: [...] For there is nothing so void of understanding, nothing so full of wantonness, as the unwieldy rabble. It were folly not to be borne, for men, while seeking to escape the wantonness of a tyrant, to give themselves up to the wantonness of a rude unbridled mob. The tyrant, in all his doings, at least knows what is he about, but a mob is altogether devoid of knowledge; for how should there be any knowledge in a rabble, untaught, and with no natural sense of what is right and fit? [...] let us choose out from the citizens a certain number of the worthiest, and put the government into their hands. For thus both we ourselves shall be among the governors, and power being entrusted to the best men, it is likely that the best counsels will prevail in the state.

[Darius says:] All that Megabyzus said against democracy was well said, I think; but about oligarchy he did not speak advisedly; for take these three forms of government---democracy, oligarchy, and monarchy---and let them each be at their best, I maintain that monarchy far surpasses the other two. What government can possibly be better than that of the very best man in the whole state? [...]

Herodotus The Persians Reject Democracy

1. Why does Otanes think democracy is best?
2. In what way does Megabyzus criticize democracy?
3. Why does Darius think monarchy is best?

Document 4

[...] hoplites were a cause of the extension of full political participation for a major part of the Athenian citizenry in the face of aristocratic and other traditional obstacles to democratic practices. There is no reason to believe the forces of aristocratic privilege or tyrannical authority would have had to give way to democratic forces had the iron link between aristocracy and military security remained intact. While the hoplite phalanx could not guarantee the development of democracy, neither could economic change no matter how pervasive, nor political philosophy no matter how profound.

Armed Forces & Society, Vol. 22, No. 1, 49-63 (1995)

1. What military change helped bring about democracy?

Document 5

In the eighth century B.C., however, a growing number of men had become sufficiently prosperous to buy metal weapons, especially since the use of iron had made them more readily available. Presumably these new hoplites, since they paid for their own equipment and trained hard to learn phalanx tactics to defend their community, felt they, too, were entitled to political rights. According to the theory of a hoplite revolution, these new hoplite-level men forced the aristocrats to share political power by threatening to refuse to fight and thereby cripple the community's military defense.

Martin, Thomas R. An Overview of Classical Greek History from Mycenae to Alexander. 25 Oct 09.
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0009%3Achapter%3D5%3Asection%3D16>

1. Why did hoplites demand greater political power?

Document 6

"Ostracism is as follows: The Demos takes a vote [...] as to whether it seemed best to hold an ostracism. When the response is positive, the Agora is fenced off with barricades; ten entrances were left open, through which they entered according to Phyle and deposited their potsherds, keeping face-down what they had written. The Nine Archons and the Boule presided. After they added up the results, whoever received the largest number, and it had to be not less than 6,000, was required to pay the penalty: he had to settle his private affairs within ten days and to depart from the City for ten years (though it later was made five years); he still received the income from his property, but he could not come nearer than Geraistos, the promontory of Euboea. Hyperbolus was the sole undistinguished person to suffer ostracism, on account of the degeneracy of his habits, not because he was suspected of aiming at tyranny. After him the practice was abandoned, which had begun when Kleisthenes was legislating, when he expelled the tyrants, so that he might toss out their friends as well.

Philochorus explains Ostracism in his Book III

1. What is "ostracism"?
2. How is ostracism a "check and balance" in Athenian democracy?

Document 7 – There are no scaffold questions for this document.

Results of Cleisthenes' reforms

Positive aspects

* Cleisthenes' reforms were important in breaking down old allegiances and jealousies. Athenians came to see themselves as citizens of Athens first and foremost.

* The number of citizens now involved in government was considerable. Aside from engaging in the local affairs of demes and the so-called tribes, all adult males, possibly about 30 000 at this time, were members of the Athenian assembly, and 500 representatives from the 10 tribes constituted the council, where one-year terms meant an annual turnover of members. Citizens came to see themselves involved at both a local and state level.

* Regardless of birth or wealth, Cleisthenes' reforms guaranteed political rights in the election of public officials.

* Although there were still large landowners, the country was essentially one of free peasant farmers and, in the city, sturdily independent urban workers.

* The word *demokratia* had not yet been invented, but the foundations had been laid.

Lumb, Jerrrey. *Cleisthenes' reforms and the development of Athenian democracy*. 25 Oct 09.
http://www.hsc.csu.edu.au/ancient_history/historical_periods/greece/greek_world/Cleisthenes.htm

APPENDIX In plain English...

Document 1

“All states have three parts: rich, poor, and middle class. The middle in anything is best, so it’s clear that it’s best to be good at being moderate. Men who are not extreme are best at being reasonable. Those who are the most beautiful, born of the best families, or rich or those who are very poor, or very weak, or really despised, all find it hard to be reasonable. The middle class will be happy to be in government but won’t want to be elected just for power. It’s bad for the state if it’s run by people who just want power. The rich and famous are not willing to take orders from others. The city should be made of mostly middle class people who are equal. This class is most secure: they aren’t jealous of other people’s achievements; they don’t plot against each other. Like Phocylides said: lots of things are best in moderation; I want to be in the middle class in my city.”

Document 2

“We don’t copy other countries, they copy us. We are more interested in the needs of the many over the demands of the few; that’s why it’s called a *democracy*. Everyone is equal under the law. It doesn’t matter what your social class is: if you are talented, you contribute. You can participate even if you’re poor. We are free in government and in our daily life outside politics.”

Document 3

“[Otanés says:] Kings are jealous of their good subjects and want them dead. Kings like the most disgusting people and listen to liars. A king is inconsistent with himself. Show him a little respect, and he’s mad because you were not respectful enough. Show him deep respect, and he accused you of kissing up. Worst of all, he ignores the laws, puts people to death without trial, treats women badly. The rule of the many doesn’t have these problems that kings commit. In democracy, people serve the government when their names are drawn from a hat, the judges have to answer for what they do, and must treat everyone equally.”

“ [Megabyzus says:] We should have an oligarchy. Nothing is worse than the stupid mob. At least the dictator knows what he’s doing. The crowd of common people is stupid. How could they be anything else but uneducated fools? We should pick the best citizens to be our leaders.”

“[Darius says:] Megabyzus is right about democracy. He’s wrong about Oligarchy, though. Of the three forms of government – democracy, oligarchy, monarchy – even on a good day, monarchy is always best because the best man in the whole state is put in charge.”

Document 4

“Hoplites were one reason for democracy rising against the forces of the aristocrats and of tradition. There is no reason to believe that the privileges of the aristocrats or the power of dictators would have just disappeared on its own to be replaced by democracy so long as only the aristocrats had military power. Though the hoplite phalanx could not guarantee the development of democracy, you can’t explain the development of democracy by just economic change or people having new ideas.”